

Chapter 28 (2,416 words)

Sal knew that he should have been more present in the transport to the Dungeon, but he couldn't take his eyes off of his father's new handcannon. Even the name was impressive as he rotated the device in his hands, looking at the Daedalus provided Appraisal.

Primary Title	Hostile Takeover Handcannon
Primary Crafters	[S. Argento]
Crafted Grade	Epic
Crafting Station	[Daedalus]
Classification	Equipment Class
Crafting Materials	[Creation Engine: Strains] [Tartarus Vault: Inventory] [Scarlet Strategist: Legacy Design]
Attributes	<p>Phase: Utilising the Void, bullets will phase through material objects until they strike an essence-based target.</p> <p>Recharge: Weapon uses excess essence to amplify impact damage.</p> <p>Assimilate: Absorbs the target's essence to permanently increase the user's proficiency, ability or base competencies. The gains will depend on the level of the target being assimilated.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assimilation Shot Count: 0• All-Sight Grade Improved: 0%• Essence Reserve Creation: 0%• Acquired Techniques: 0 <p>Ravage: Unleashes a relentless surge of electrified essence at target, increasing in damage power the longer it's active.</p>

Abilities	Phase Recharge Assimilate Ravage
Assimilated Entities:	<p>Estimated Stat Gain: Trace Leecher: [Unknown] [0 Kills]</p> <p>Estimated Stat Gain: Minimal Prowler: [Mobility] [0 Kills] Voider: [Perception] [0 Kills] Hulker: [Strength] [0 Kills]</p> <p>Estimated Stat Gain: Standard Scuttler: [Strength] [Endurance] [0 Kills] Thumper: [Perception] [Mobility] [0 Kills] Switcher: [Perception] [Adaptation] [0 Kills]</p> <p>Estimated Stat Gain: Significant Blinker: [Perception] [Mobility] [0 Kills] Husker: [Endurance] [Resistance] [0 Kills] Dredger: [Strength] [Endurance] [Resistance] [0 Kills]</p>
Power Source	Internal Essence Core: [100%] [92 Shots] Est. Atmospheric Recharge: 2hrs 49mins 40secs Est. Assimilated Essence Recharge: 13 mins 11secs
Evolution	Grade Evolution: Possible Est. Evolution to Legendary-Grade (2,730 shots) Est. Evolution to Mythic-Grade (31,890 shots)
Paired Devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Mythic Guild: Athena] • [Mythic Guild: Daedalus] • [Mythic Guild: Hostile Takeover Armour]
Build Quality	Flawless
Build Condition	100%
Est. Value	[\$1,250,000.00] to [\$1,800,000.00]

The fact that he was being attributed as the primary crafter was laughable. He hadn't done a thing to make the gun, yet Prime was giving him the credit. Sure, he had put together the design for the Scarlet Moon Revolver, but this thing was so far removed from it. All of his guessing about the evolutionary advancement rates was actually calculable, and Prime had given him estimates... in addition to the primary stats that could be taken from different demons. Had Daedalus used Prime's databases to find that information? All of them were estimates, which would likely be corrected once it started taking down demons, but Sal was still excited.

"I'm guessing you'd like one of those for yourself?" Petro asked knowingly as he leaned across the small table separating them to take a look at the gun. "Your machine is an excellent Crafter, but a

pretty awful Appraiser. I'd retire if I sold that thing for less than three million."

Sophia smiled at the comment, leaning closer to get a better look at the gun. It was clear that she didn't exactly understand what she was looking at, so she ended up defaulting to good old-fashioned pragmatism. "While it looks good, it doesn't exactly compliment the rest of the outfit. Red and Blue are a difficult mix to work with, so you'd likely need to sell them separately, rather than as a set."

"Sal, by extension, made this for me." Petro said as he placed a hand on the gun, as though shielding it from her words. "I'm never going to sell it. Besides, the description basically says that it's designed to improve All-Sight. I doubt it would be useful for anyone... you know, other than Sal."

He was right. The Assimilate Ability had indicated that it was targeted towards the development of All-Sight. Jackal would be able to do the same job for Sal, and maybe even pick up a few abilities along the way. Hopefully something a little more useful than the wires of death that it currently produced. Slinky would probably get a good chance to exercise in the Dungeon, too.

Sal glanced behind his father to the back section of the large taxi. It was designed to hold up to a dozen people, or half that number with full-gear. Thankfully, they weren't short of space, and both Vanessa and Upgrade sat a seat apart, with Sakura, Fabi and Rochelle seated in the back, chatting to each other animatedly. Well, the first two more than the latter.

"Harlan said there was a special hand-signal system for people to use when dealing with Switchers." Sal began, not sure how to finish the sentence. "Should we come up with something like that instead of a safe-word?"

Sophia shook her head, dismissing the concern. "Hand-signals are good in theory, but they're typically used in more dense Dungeon environments. Dungeons where making noise could make you a target for the more predatory types. Scuttlers are the other key variable in the one we're going to, and screaming at the top of your lungs isn't going to make you any more or less of a target."

Upgrade frowned from her seat. "That's not actually true." She glanced towards Vanessa, as though looking for backup, and the Controller didn't disappoint.

With a heavy sigh, Vanessa looked at Sophia and shook her head. "I get where you're coming from, but they teach it differently at Quest Academy. Switchers are able to learn incredibly fast, which is why it's a risk to expose them to the pitch and frequency of your voice. They'll be able to replicate it easily if they can hear you. Hand signals have been used as the universally accepted method for the last ten years."

Sophia stared at her for a few moments, before looking to Petro in mock indignation. "Did she just call me old?"

"Sure sounds like she did." Petro said as he turned in his seat animatedly, as though he was trying to climb over it to defend his wife's pride. "Let me at her!"

Even Rochelle laughed at that, as Petro returned to his seat with a chuckle. "It's a good point, so do we have any suggestions on the best one to use? Ideally something that can be learned in..." He glanced at the time displayed digitally on the clock embedded above the table. "Four minutes?"

Upgrade's smile was wide as she glanced at Sal. "How about the Maestro Pose?"

"Is that the one he does when he finishes Crafting?" Vanessa asked with a laugh. "I heard about that one. It's this, right?" She put her hands up dramatically, fingers angled outwards, while imitating a look of deep concentration mingled with satisfaction.

Sal just stared at her. "Come on, you've never watched me crafting before... that's not fair."

Vanessa pointed to the backseat where Fabi was grinning, not a shred of guilt on her face. "She told me all about it."

"Public enemy, number one. Got it." Sal deadpanned as he locked eyes with Fabi. "Stop telling people about the stupid pose. I don't even do it that much."

Sophia laughed as she emulated the exact same pose that Vanessa had completed. "This looks good to me. Does it work for everyone else?"

Petro frowned. "It seems very open to imitation, though. Literally anyone that raises their arms will look like an ally, so I think we should go with something a little more complex."

Vanessa looked at him strangely. "Well, for starters... we're probably the best outfitted group possible. Switchers can imitate us, sure, and even our powers if they're very good. They won't be able to recreate the equipment we're wearing, so the rule of thumb would be to look for those little details." She gestured at the bodysuit she wore, Upgrade's golden arm, Sakura's stealth set, Fabi's Macclemark and Rochelle's grapple coat. "There's no chance that we're going to mistake a naked Salvatore for the real thing."

Sal blinked in surprise. "Wait. We're going to see the naked versions of each other?" He had ultimately decided on wearing the stealth set that they had crafted for the mission with Paradox. It gave him Shadow Step and had plenty of protections in place, which would hopefully allow him to utilise the Mythical Blight Jackal without worry.

"Hey, don't get your hopes up." Vanessa smirked as she pointed at her right fist which was clenched. "I'll be killing them faster than you can take a proper look."

Sal pointed at his parents. "Not to damage your ego or anything, but I was more worried about seeing them naked."

Sophia wasn't phased in the slightest. "Good thing we kept ourselves in shape then, wasn't it. I knew all that dancing would come in handy." She smiled at Petro who nodded in agreement.

Upgrade snorted as she glanced at Vanessa's surprised expression. "Ego death looks good on you."

"All the Switchers I've come across had clothing, though. Not sure if that's an evolutionary thing, or if they're stealing it from Heroes that failed in Dungeons." Fabi added, bringing the tone right down to ground level. "You know, just if you were all worried about them actually being naked."

Petro winced ever so slightly at the implication, but Rochelle looked to be quite relieved.

"Also, they don't always take on the appearance of someone in the party." Vanessa cautioned them, a rosy tint on her cheeks indicating that she was still a little embarrassed. "They could pretend to be a trapped Hero, imitating someone they've encountered before. Remember that there is no way that someone could have survived that long in a Dungeon without assistance."

Upgrade suppressed a shudder as she sat back in her seat, folding her arms. "I've never actually fought one before, but I heard all sorts of stories from Forge, where the words they try to communicate with are just the screams of their former victims. Parroting their agony as though it will build trust."

Sal stared at her for a few seconds. "I know I should be happy to hear all of this now rather than experiencing it first hand in the Dungeon, but that is nightmare-fuel."

Vanessa cracked her knuckles. "Okay, so Maestro pose is our hand-signal. Don't trust anyone naked. Get Salvatore and Petro their All-Sight Endurance, and then release the Realm Matriarch thing on the rest of them?"

Everyone nodded in unison to show they were onboard with the plan.

Sal had originally been against taking the Realm Matriarch into the Dungeon, based on the threat level they were going up against. Upgrade's counter to that was the wealth of abilities that would be available for future drones, coupled with the safety of having such a strong team there to assist. The Realm Matriarch wouldn't be fooled by the Switchers, and the Scuttlers wouldn't be much of a threat either.

Another factor at play was their lack of materials in reserve. Apparently the Realm Matriarch had a high material demand for producing Drones, which had made a substantial dent in their inventory despite all of the resources it gathered on their first outing. Prime was more than happy to utilise the Creation Engine to create whatever it needed, at the cost of emptying every linked subspace.

Fabi's suggestion was a little more chaotic than the others, where she proposed that they leave the Realm Matriarch in the Dungeon, allowing it to keep fighting after they left. Sal wanted to refuse, but there was a part of him that thought it was a good idea. He just didn't want to risk leaving the drone in a dangerous area while it was still learning how to adapt to enemies. There was also the problem of the Drone production. He had already set it up to produce one, that should have been done by now. If it was to be completed within a high-level Dungeon, there was very little chance that it would survive.

Still, both Fabi and Upgrade were keen on the idea, so Sal didn't dismiss it outright. If he was able to find a way to preserve the mini-drones... which he was still refusing to call Serfs, he'd go ahead with the plan. Also, it was contingent on the Realm Matriarch's performance against the Switchers and other Demons in the Dungeon. If it was struggling, he'd insist that they take it back with them.

"You okay?" Sophia asked him gently. "You've got nothing to worry about in there. We'll make sure to keep you safe and sound."

"Thanks, but I was just thinking about the Realm Matriarch." Sal explained with a chuckle, only to receive a look of confusion from his mother. He tried to clarify, but his father interrupted them both.

"Looks like we're here." Petro announced as he looked out the window.

Sal followed his father's lead and looked through the glass, half expecting to see the same sort of layout that they had in Exchequer Street. Yet, there were no vendors, businesses, headquarters... or anything. All of the Dungeons he had seen so far were surrounded by commerce, except this one. It looked like the place had been packed up, picked clean and moved off to better opportunity.

Hollow buildings missing both doors and windows, sometimes walls, were visible through the non-existent rooftops of the surrounding residential district. It was clear that they had been in use, with some still holding tarp-like covers over spaces. Roads were dragged clean leading to the Dungeon, and barricades were erected in the event of a Dungeon Break.

Only a few mounted turrets were still in operation, with more than a dozen pods missing their guns. Essence Barriers were erected in a tight grouping around the entrance, unpowered and likely only set to activate if there was indeed a break. Had the last custodians of the Dungeon taken everything with them? It looked like only the bare essentials had been left, which was more than a little concerning.

"Luke would have a heart attack if he saw this." Sophia muttered as she leaned across Sal to get a better look. "It's like the Hunters Bureau wants the thing to break."

Petro snorted as he shook his head. "It's one of the ugly sides of privatisation. As soon as something is unprofitable, it's no longer their problem. This place is now the Mythic Guild's responsibility, but I wish they'd have given us some warning about the state they left it in."

The transport vehicle came to a stop on the ground, leading Vanessa to announce loudly as she opened up the door. "We can talk about that later. It's Dungeon time!"